

Distinctives: when not to work

Mercy McFarlane considers the joy of keeping Sunday special



Christian medics have better reason for hard work than most - working both for the glory of God and the good of our neighbour. In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus says, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me... He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind..." As future doctors, this is our purpose: hard work is not just a necessity, it is a privilege. By serving in medicine we are following in the footsteps of our Saviour. But as Christians, we are not only called to work, we are also called not to.

In Exodus 20, God gave his people ten commandments to live by. The fourth commandment says: 'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work... Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.' (Exodus 20:8-11) The argument of Saturday versus Sunday aside, what does it mean to keep the Sabbath holy? In the Bible, for something or someone to be holy, it meant it was

set apart for the Lord. This is what God asks of us, that we set aside one day in seven for him.

This isn't to say Sunday is all about rules, that we can only go to church, read our Bibles and pray all day. God's commands are for the blessing and preservation of his people; he doesn't delight in legalism. But chances are, most of us *aren't making that mistake*. We tend to verge towards its opposite. We are more likely to see Sunday as just another day to catch up on lectures, study and hang out with friends. These are all worthy things, but if we miss the true purpose of Sunday, then we are sacrificing the best for the good. Too often we are Marthas, running around doing a hundred things, when Jesus asks that we sit at his feet and learn from him. Sunday, particularly is when he asks that we sit under his word. Although CS Lewis was speaking generally, he captured it well in *The Weight of Glory* when he said, 'It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is



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offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.¹ This is us. We are sacrificing time spent in God's house, in his word and with his people for the temporary stresses and distractions that surround us.

There is no denying that as medical students we are busy and often proud of it. With more lectures than most students, placements and hours spent in the library, leisure time is already minimal. Many of us will play a sport or an instrument to a high standard. We may be on one committee, sometimes several. Hopefully we make it to church on a Sunday, but the idea of setting aside a whole day, well, we just don't have that kind of time.

But maybe it is our mindset that is flawed. 'Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere' (Psalm 84:10). In a world of depression, starvation, divorce and cancer, where else can we find fullness of joy or rest for our souls? His desire for us, is that we rest on Sundays from our day-to-day work and focus on him.

In 1793, during the French Revolution, France denounced Christianity, and in an attempt to remove all religious influence, implemented a new calendar: the French Republican Calendar.² This calendar renamed the months, but crucially, it eliminated Sundays with nine days of work and then a day of rest.³ Although this lasted for several years, ultimately the ten day 'decade' failed because workers were burnt out working nine days in a row.

Alongside the command to remember the Sabbath is a promised blessing. In Isaiah 58:13-14 God says, "'If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honourable, and if you honour it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in

the Lord, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.'" The mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

It offers us the chance to spend time in church, listening to God speak to us from his word, to spend time with Christians for our mutual encouragement and to praise our wonderful Saviour. We can refresh our souls and rediscover our purpose.

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There will come a time when most of us will have to work on Sundays. Our works of healing and serving are necessary and good. As junior doctors, maybe we'll get one weekend off in three. Hopefully that ratio improves, as we go through training, but surely it should make us treasure the time we have all the more. Now we have the opportunity to spend our Sundays in God's house and with his people. Now is our chance to grow. If we don't build strong foundations now, how will we stand when our time and chance for fellowship is limited?

I encourage you to rediscover Sundays as the restful blessing God intended. A day to delight in our Saviour and to be with his people. Who knows, taking a day off might force us to learn time management too! =

REFERENCES

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